

SUBJECT: **MESSAGE WORKERS RIGHTS AND SAFETY INITIATIVE**
INITIATED BY: **COUNCILMEMBER JOHN ERICKSON**
PREPARED BY: **COMMUNITY & LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS DIVISION**
(John Leonard, Manager)
(Andi Lovano, Supervisor)

STATEMENT ON THE SUBJECT:

The City Council will consider implementing a Massage Worker Rights & Safety Initiative, informed by a comprehensive information gathering process, with the goal of leveraging existing social services for massage workers, improving regulatory protocols, reducing harmful enforcement practices, and enhancing massage workers' understanding of their labor rights and available City services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Direct staff to develop a Massage Workers Rights and Safety Initiative focusing on providing culturally and linguistically sensitive, targeted outreach, education, and linkage to services for workers in the massage industry.
2. Direct staff to issue a Request for Proposals (RFP) for an agency and facilitator to lead this initiative.
3. Return to City Council with the results of the RFP, a request for funding, and staff's recommendations for next steps in this process.

BACKGROUND / ANALYSIS:

The massage parlor industry thrives in major metropolitan cities and suburban communities throughout the country. In Los Angeles and many other cities, a subset of massage parlors employ workers who sell sexual services. Many of these workers are immigrants who are particularly vulnerable to exploitative labor practices, and face risks of sexually transmitted infections, isolation, stigma, and violence from owners and clients.¹ Innovative programming to improve outreach, education, and services, and to modify enforcement of laws that penalize workers can improve health and safety for massage workers.

On March 15, 2021, the City Council adopted a resolution declaring that the City does not target specified sex work related offenses. It is important to note that this resolution does not apply to human trafficking related offenses or operations that have been performed in

¹ John Chin et al., *Illicit Massage Parlors in Los Angeles County and New York City: Stories from Women Workers* (2019), p. 4, at [MP Study 10.11.19 FINAL.pdf \(johnchin.net\)](#).

the City recently targeting illicit behavior at massage parlors. Human trafficking is unlike sex work because human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of sex act or labor. Building on West Hollywood's deprioritization of sex work crimes, reaching out to workers in massage parlors who provide sexual services to inform them of rights and services is a logical next step. In order to determine how best to serve these workers, the City needs to begin with outreach to understand the workers' needs and any potential gaps in services.

This item proposes the creation of a Massage Workers Rights & Safety Initiative that would focus on performing outreach with massage workers, massage worker advocates, public health leaders, and organizations working in relevant areas (labor rights, human trafficking prevention, legal services, health care, immigrant affairs, job training, faith community, etc.). The goal of the outreach is to inform workers about their rights and services available to them and gather information about services that are needed or inaccessible. Informed by the comprehensive information gathering process, the goal is to leverage existing social services for massage workers, improve regulatory protocols, reduce harmful enforcement practices, and enhance massage workers' understanding of their labor rights and available City services. This initiative would not be focused on human trafficking, as this may dissuade people from participating. Rather, the focus is on labor rights and proper practices.

It is recommended that the outreach process be led by an outside agency or facilitator with specialized experience in massage worker advocacy, who will assist in outlining the goals and objectives of the Massage Workers Rights & Safety Initiative, and develop a scope of work. This item directs staff to issue a Request for Proposals to determine what type of agencies are available and interested in participating and return to City Council with recommendations for how best to move forward. The lead agency and facilitator would coordinate with the City's Code Compliance Division and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department as required for health and safety issues, but the primary effort of this initiative is not a function of law enforcement or Code.

Los Angeles County Massage Worker Outreach Plan

In January 2020, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a motion directing the Department of Public Health, in partnership with the Office of Immigrant Affairs of the Department of Consumer and Business Affairs (DCBA) and Workforce Development, Aging, and Community Services (WCACS), as well as community stakeholders, to develop a comprehensive outreach, education, and engagement strategy to provide wraparound services to massage workers in a culturally and linguistically sensitive manner.

The County assembled a multi-sector group of expert governmental and community professionals to address the needs of the massage establishment workforce. The group included the public health sector, legal services, prosecutors, public defenders,

investigators, academics, labor and sex trafficking advocates, sex worker advocates, and community services providers including: Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles, Bet Tzedek, the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, Red Canary Song, Sex Workers Outreach Project-Los Angeles, Thai Community Development Center, US Department of Labor-Wage and Hour Division, and DCBA Office of Immigrant Affairs, Public Health’s Office of Women’s Health, and the Office of the Public Defender. This multidisciplinary group developed a two-year pilot program to reach female, Mandarin-speaking, Chinese immigrant massage workers in the unincorporated San Gabriel Valley. This population was prioritized for the focus of the initiative because these workers likely represent the majority in alleged illicit massage establishments and have been the target of past raids at LA County massage parlors. However, stakeholders conveyed that an important strategy for the project was to address worker issues broadly, not focused solely on human trafficking which may deter workers from participating.

The goal of this pilot program is to:

- Build on existing best practices
- Utilize strengths of community agencies and government partners
- Develop culturally sensitive, linguistically appropriate, trauma informed outreach, education, and engagement strategies
- Educate workers about their rights
- Link workers with health education, health care, legal services
- Avoid law enforcement involvement unless necessary

Because of funding limitations and the focus on COVID-19 over the past year, the County’s program has been on hold. But the City of West Hollywood may want to use the proposal as a model for developing its own a local program. The San Francisco Department of Public Health also has a massage worker outreach program that can be used as an example.

CONFORMANCE WITH VISION 2020 AND THE GOALS OF THE WEST HOLLYWOOD GENERAL PLAN:

This item is consistent with the Primary Strategic Goal(s) (PSG) and/or Ongoing Strategic Program(s) (OSP) of:

- OSP-5: Support People through Social Services.
- OSP-12: Actively Participate in Regional Issues.

In addition, this item is compliant with the following goal(s) of the West Hollywood General Plan:

- HS-1: Maintain and pursue humane social policies and social services that address the needs of the community.
- HS-3: Promote a community with strong social networks and cross-cultural interaction.

EVALUATION PROCESSES:

As part of the Request for Proposals process, staff will develop a scope of work and criteria to evaluate the initiative.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY AND HEALTH:

N/A

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

The Massage Workers Rights & Safety Initiative will include a diverse group of residents, business owners, and community members in West Hollywood. The program outline will also be presented to relevant City Commissions and Advisory Boards including but not limited to the Women’s Advisory Board, Human Services Commission, and Public Safety Commission.

OFFICE OF PRIMARY RESPONSIBILITY:

HUMAN SERVICES & RENT STABILIZATION DEPARTMENT / SOCIAL SERVICES DIVISION

FISCAL IMPACT:

None at this time. Staff will return to Council with a request for funding for a lead agency and facilitator. It is anticipated that the contract for services could range from _____ to _____ depending on the scope of work proposed.